

How Kids Learn to Follow Jesus

One of the questions we get many times at the GCM Collective is, “What about kids? How do you have time to disciple your children during all this mission stuff, and what does it look like?”

I have three kids, a 10 year old, a 7 year old, and an 16 month old. I own a business, elder in the church, preach, and participate as an executive team member of the GCM Collective. Not to mention I coach leaders around the world and travel for speaking and training events. How do I have time? I learned early on, from my brothers at Soma Communities, that I only have one life, and mission has to be part of my everyday life, not some other life that I need to live. I don't have time to get into all of that teaching, but it transformed how I see mission and discipleship. (To see an illustration of this look here: [We Have Been Given One Life](#)). Needless to say, I've decided to serve and leverage my life as much as I can. I'm busy and you are probably busy, too. How can we disciple kids in the midst of such hectic community and mission filled lives?

Holistic Discipleship

What is the goal of children's discipleship? Are we just trying to teach them stuff? See, the goal is not that our children will merely know the right answers on their Bible College theological entry exam, also know as Sunday School. We certainly want them to know God and understand the gospel in their minds. But, discipleship cannot stop at intellectual assent of biblical truths in their heads alone but must penetrate their hearts, too. In the same way, the goal is not for children discipleship cannot stop at their hearts, but must be evidenced in their lives. Certainly our children's discipleship is not only about getting them to behave and use proper manners. The Bible speaks to parenting and disciple making more holistically than this:

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. – Deuteronomy 11:18-20

This passage tells us two fundamental principles in parenting. One, discipleship is for the head, heart, and hand. We are to teach our children to know the gospel, believe the gospel, and obey the gospel. Two, the discipleship process is happening all the time, in everyday life. Every moment of the day is a chance to speak, teach, and demonstrate the gospel. My aim with this article is to offer some easy handles and ideas for parents to obediently live Deuteronomy 11 with their kids.

Head

We want our kids to know theology. We want them to know who God is, what God has done, who we are and how we should live. The issue is our kids get bored with the many ways we have tried to do teach this in the past. Memorize this verse, sit here for Sunday school, or listen

to mommy and daddy read from the Bible. None of those things are bad, but what if we could do all those things in ways that they'd actually love and look forward to and ask to do?

- What TV show does your kid love to watch? Watch it with them and tell them that at the end we are going to discuss questions in which we see ways the characters are living out their identity, how are their lives looking like Jesus, how are their lives showing who/what they are trusting, etc. For my kids, it's Phineas and Ferb. We sit down and watch it, then discuss. The night before I wrote this article, we spoke about servanthood, identity, idols, fears, anxiety, the Imago Dei, etc. After we discussed, we prayed as a family for very specific things that we discussed. Guess what the kids are always asking to do? "Daddy, can we do Phineas and Ferb and theology?" They desire to learn because it is something they enjoy.
- Teach them from material they will enjoy and let them teach and dialogue through it. I personally use two resources: The Jesus Story Book Bible and the Story of God for Kids. When we go through these resources, I am always asking questions to get their insight. These resources are great because there are pictures and questions and really gets the kids involved, instead of just sitting there and listening. I also allow my 10 year old to lead through this so he can learn what it looks like to lead and create discussion. In this I am able to disciple him in what it looks like to lead by allowing him to do it himself.

Heart

Not only do we want our children to learn theology and mission through teaching, but we want them to believe it and know it in their hearts. We want it to go from information, to transformation. Know this: you have to be faithful in this and there will be many times we try this with our kids and it will sail over their head. We will articulate the gospel in eloquent ways and they will have no reaction. We have to be faithful. Find out how to affect their heart by seeking the Spirit and continue to do it, even if you don't get the reaction you were hoping for.

- Discipline like you believe the gospel. I learned this from John Piper some years ago. He simply asked, "Does your discipline mirror grace and the gospel or legalism?" My kids never know when they are going to be punished for a sin. I try to sit them down after they have sinned and walk through grace and mercy and the effects of sin. We get to the heart of the issue of their sin, instead of saying, "stop it!" There are times when they are not punished for their sin, and we speak a lot about grace. There are also times when their sin causes natural consequences. For example, they might leave a favorite toy outside when they were supposed to bring it inside and it gets ruined. When this happens, we merely point out the consequence and pray together for forgiveness and reconciliation. When you spend time demonstrating in discipline what grace, the gospel and reconciliation looks like, it hits the heart.
- Demonstrate. I got this idea from my buddy Caesar. One of the discipleship issues we had with our older child had to do with his behavior while he was playing outside. We decided that if he was having issues playing outside, he would have to come inside or face punishment. The punishment was to sit on the wall for 20 minutes. Lots of fun. Instead, when the time came for him to receive his punishment, I told him I'd take it for

him. We talked about Jesus and the good news and how he has done this for us. This sounded great, but he listened, and then ran back outside like nothing happened. I still do this, because I think at some point, it will sink in. But you have to know: they are kids and they won't always react in the ways you were hoping.

- When you see your child do something that reminds you of Jesus, tell them and praise them for it. Not to the point where they get all the credit, but as a pointer. When they see how their actions depict God's character, it really freaks them out. My 7 year old last night asked, "God works through me to show who he is?" It really hit him. Our kids need to hear about God, not only when they are doing things that are disappointing, but also when they are showing the fruit of the Spirit. Recently, my 10 year old came up and told me that his little brother made him lunch for school. He was stoked! I told him, "Caleb, where do you think he learned that?" He replied, "God?" I said, "He learned it from you as you have been serving him. And you learned it from God as Jesus served and serves you. You have been showing your brother Jesus. Isn't it amazing that he does those things he sees in you as you show him Jesus?"
- Continue to remind them they are loved by God and you, no matter what. We do this in both their sin and their praise. We want them to continually know that God loves regardless of their actions. Their identity and acceptance is not wrapped up in what they do but in who God is and what he does. I do this when they do something that requires discipline and I do this when they show off who God is.

Hands

Not only do our kids need to know about God in their head, and know what he's done in their heart, but they also need to work this out as disciples and missionaries. We have to know that our children are not missionaries only when they get older. They are missionaries now.

- Involve your kids in the mission. Rarely do we do things that don't involve our kids. When we do events, most of the time it is with families. The reason is I want my kids to see that it is totally normal to be around those that don't believe like us and what it looks like to hang out with them. I don't want them to ever think that our job is to do things so we'll get something in return. We merely show others what God is like, we plant, we water, but God causes the growth. The best way to do this is to model it for them in life on life. So, at neighborhood BBQs or neighborhood breakfasts, they have jobs before and after. We talk about why we are doing these, what their thoughts are, and their struggles with it. They get to walk this out and deal with the consequences of following Jesus: when their toys get broken, when they have to clean up after others, etc. When all this happens, we get to talk about what it means to serve and show off Jesus without expecting anything in return.
- Make your house the "hang-out-house." Our kids know that they can always have friends over and invite them in for dinner, etc. Because of this, they are actively sharing their lives with those around us. They see what it means to have an open home, to be hospitable, to believe that our possessions are God's and not ours. They also know that to open our home means there will sometimes be kids they don't want to play with, but we open our home anyway. We love our enemies, we don't hate them or shun them. The more you allow your kids to have people over and just hang out and play,

the more they will be able to understand mission in the everyday.

- Invite their friends and parents out to your activities. Recently, I took my boys to a movie and dinner, so I asked them who they wanted to bring. I then invited their friends and their family to go out with us. Again, this is simple. Their friends and families came and hung out. We were already going to do it, why not do it with others? This doesn't mean we eat dinner and ask the other Dad, "You see the bread on your kid's plate? That reminds of when Jesus said he was the bread of life." Be a good human and hang out with others, be friends, show your kids what it looks like to be hospitable in all areas of life.
- Ask your children what charity they'd like to help on their birthday. We have done this with both our older kids. We tell them, "Mom and Dad will buy you a gift, and so will your grandparents, but what if we had your friends bring something for a charity?" We have had food drives, blanket drives, and more for one of our missional communities that helps the homeless in our town. Our kids actually love doing this! They get to help others and participate in serving.

Normal Life with Intentionality

I know these things aren't earth shattering ideas. They are simple everyday life type of activities. That's the point. We don't need some program to raise our children for us, we can do this in normal, everyday life. That way our kids will understand what following Jesus looks like and will desire to do it, too. Some days are better than others, some things work better than others. You know your family. A simple way to start is just to look at your schedule with your family and start asking, "How can we be more intentional with these things we are already doing so our children can better understand who God is, what he has done, who he has made us?" What can we do to holistically disciple our children, their head, heart, and hands?

Just think if your parents taught you about God while watching cartoons? Pretty cool parents, pretty fun way to learn theology.

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